THE GRACE OF GOD AND SOMEBODINESS
January 16, 2005

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 40:1–8
Matthew 3:13–17

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
Matthew 3:17 (NRSV)

We will have to repent in this generation
not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people
but for the appalling silence of the good people.
Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability;
It comes through the tireless effort of men and women willing to be co-workers with God,
and without the hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of stagnation.
We must use time creatively,
in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.

Marin Luther King Jr.
Letter from the Birmingham Jail

Dear God, sometimes the news is so bad we don't want to hear it.
And sometimes the news is so good we can't bring ourselves to believe it.
So startle us again with your amazing grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

1963, in retrospect, was a pivotal time in contemporary American history. It was pivotal for me personally. I graduated from divinity school/seminary in June, was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament the same month, and settled down to full-time ministry in the small congregation of steel workers in the Calumet region that I had been trying to serve as a student-pastor, not always successfully and with far more confidence than was warranted.

John F. Kennedy was the president; we were becoming more involved militarily in Vietnam, but all the news at home was about the civil rights movement. At the center of the movement—in a sense its inspiration, visionary, and embodiment—was a Baptist minister with a Ph.D. from

Boston University, a student of Ghandi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Reinhold Niebuhr. His name was Martin Luther King Jr.

The organization King headed was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and under his leadership, it became the leader and primary organizer of an effort to advocate for equal rights and opportunities for minority Americans in a culture that had, mostly by law, denied those rights for more than three centuries. Students and young people were entranced. Among King's accomplishments was forcing a generation of idealists who had pretty much given up on the church as irrelevant to the world to rethink their assumptions and reconsider the church.

I am not the only minister who stayed in because of Martin Luther King, what he said and did and his deep commitment to the church as the body of Christ and as an agent of the kingdom of God. Reinhold Niebuhr said that the civil rights movement saved the church in the 1950s from irrelevance.

In the early months of 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and King went to Alabama, to Birmingham, the heart of the deep South, to advocate for civil rights and voting rights. In 1963, there were counties in Alabama in which the vast majority of citizens were African American, but not a single black person was registered to vote. Throughout the state, "Colored" and "White Only" signs were found in restaurants, theaters, bus stations, public toilets, and drinking fountains. King met with the merchants of Birmingham to ask that the racial signs be removed. The merchants promised to remove them. The promise was broken. So King applied for a parade permit to protest. The application was denied. The demonstration happened anyhow. Participants included African American citizens of Alabama, white college students from around the country, including classmates of mine, some clergy. The Director of Public Safety, Bull Connor, directed the police. King and others were arrested and put in jail.

At this point, local ministers of the large white Birmingham churches communicated with King that while they understood his position and ultimately agreed that all Americans, regardless of color, ought to have equal rights and equal opportunity, couldn't he wait a little, be patient, allow the people of Alabama to bring about change at their own rate of speed. They objected to public demonstrations because demonstrations raised tensions in the community. And they objected to people not from Alabama coming in and stirring up trouble; "outside agitators" they called them.

Sitting in his jail cell, with lots of time to think, King wrote them a letter, a long letter, explaining why he was doing what he was doing. It is respectful, firm, but not at all polemic. He concludes by wishing them well in their ministries. King sent a copy of the letter to a journal located in Chicago, the

Christian Century magazine, which was the first journal to publish it, "The Letter from Birmingham Jail." The original is in the archives of the *Christian Century*. I have a copy, and I read it in its entirety this week.

It is an American classic. The author brings to the table Socrates, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Jefferson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, T. S. Eliot. Patiently he answers his critics, his fellow clergy, point by point.

- *Outside agitators?* King answered, "Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

- *Why demonstrate? Isn't negotiation better?* Negotiations don't work, he explained. Promises are not kept. Tension is necessary for growth in any avenue of life.

- *Isn't it inappropriate for a minister of the gospel to break the law?* They should have known better than to ask that. Starting with the prophets of Israel, to Jesus and St. Paul, both arrested and executed by the state, to Christians in Nazi Germany and behind the Iron Curtain, King gave his brother clergy a clinic in the long and honorable tradition of civil disobedience and referenced St. Augustine, who said, "An unjust law is no law at all."

- *Can't you be patient? Can't you wait?* His response was particularly eloquent: "We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. It is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say 'wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will; when you see hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; . . . when you suddenly find your tongue twisted as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park . . . and see tears welling up when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky; . . . when you are plagued with fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodines'; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

A few months later men affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan planted a bomb in a Baptist church in Birmingham and four little African American girls were killed during their Sunday School class. The country was appalled. Civil rights advocates were galvanized. Those of us serving white congregations knew the time to speak and act had come. The president was assassinated in November of that year. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, with the

Republican senator from Illinois, Everett Dirksen, guided the Voting Rights Act through Congress. Change happened because people acted; Christian people, in the name of their Lord Jesus Christ, put life on the line for the cause of justice. Four years later, Martin Luther King himself was assassinated.

It is important in these days when the churches expend so much energy looking inward and fighting internal battles to remember a time, not so long ago, when churches stood up for something important and right and played a role in positive social change and the advancement of justice. History may one day judge that it was one of the church's finest hours.

But what is also important to see is that at the heart of the civil rights struggle is a theological theme that runs through the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," namely the spiritual impoverishment of people who are the victims of racial prejudice, what King called "the degenerating sense of nobodiness." There is a universality about that that is deeper even than the particularity of racism. "Nobodiness" is a spiritual malady that can afflict anybody.

King saw it as the real tragedy, the spiritual tragedy, of racism. His voice is echoed by Princeton's Cornel West, author of *Race Matters* and a new book, *Democracy Matters.* West says that there is a growth of "deadening nihilism" in the land, "a spiritual deadness, a sense that I don't matter, I can't make a difference, I'm a nobody." Nihilism, he says, is the "lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness" (*Democracy Matters,* p. 26).

"The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love." And it is "overcome not by argument or analysis—but by love and care. Diseases of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. The turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth" (*Race Matters,* p. 19). For us, this is not only a matter of justice in the political and economic arena. It is a deeply spiritual matter. Racism is a social evil and also a spiritual disease.

The late Howard Thurman was a distinguished theologian and professor at Boston University, the first African American to hold a faculty post there. How, someone once asked him, had he survived all the hostility and cruelty and discrimination he experienced as a child? He answered, "My mama kept telling me I was a child of God and I believed her."

Thurman told the story of a trip he took once through the South in the 1950s with his wife and two daughters. At a rest stop, his daughter saw a playground and headed for the swings. They did not see the sign that read

“Whites Only.” Thurman patiently explained that they couldn’t use the swings. They began to cry. So much as his mother did for him, he gathered his little girls in his arms and said, “Listen, you little girls are somebody. . . . In fact, you are so important and valuable to God, that it takes the governor and the lieutenant governor and the whole state police force to keep you little girls off those swings” (Thomas Long, *Testimony*, p. 63).

What holds all this together, the social and spiritual dimensions, is the grace of God that comes to each of us, whoever we are, and confers on us worth, value, identity, and dignity deeper in us than anything the world can confer or deny. What holds all this together is the experience of being loved unconditionally and accepted for who we are and being given meaning and purpose not by virtue of the color of our skin or our worldly condition or our sexual orientation or our party affiliation, not by virtue of anything we have done or not done, but by virtue of the One who loves us. That is the very spiritual essence of Christianity. “Once you were no people. Now you are God’s people” (1 Peter 2:10).

One day, when he was thirty years old, Jesus came to a turning point in his own life. We assume that he had been living at home taking care of his mother and brothers and sisters, working as a carpenter. On this day he went out into the country, to the river Jordan, to hear his cousin John, who was causing quite a stir with his powerful preaching. At the end of the day Jesus walked into the river and allowed John to pour water over his head in a ritual of cleansing and rebirth called baptism. For him, it was the end and the beginning of a new life. For him, it was the day he knew God’s unconditional love, a voice from heaven that said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We really don’t know anything about Jesus’ spirituality before that day. We can safely assume that he was an observant Jew, that he attended synagogue, lived by the law, observed festivals and Holy Days. What we do know is that there came a day when he changed and decided to live more intentionally and passionately for God; we do know that there was a day when he received a new identity, a new sense of who he was and what his life was about. It was the day he heard the voice and knew himself to be God’s child, the beloved.

We remember that and claim it every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism: “Jennifer Louise, you are a child of God. You belong to Jesus Christ forever.” The experience of grace, of somebodiness conferred on us by God, was, Martin Luther King understood, at the heart of the civil rights movement, and it is at the heart of our faith, and at the heart of the challenge ahead of us still. Much has been done; there is much to do.

One out of five American children lives in poverty. One out of two African American children live in poverty. African American young men are less likely than young white men to use drugs but many times more likely to be arrested on drug charges. One of out five young African American men in urban areas is either in jail or on parole.

There is work to do. And it is why the mission outreach programs of this church, Tutoring, Summer Day, are so important and so authentically an expression of the grace of God, the somebodiness of every child.

Everybody agrees that education is the key. And here, particularly, we have work to do—in Illinois.

In Illinois, the state contributes a smaller proportion of the cost of public education per child than all but three other states. We're near the bottom. That means that Illinois schools are unusually dependent on property taxes, and that means there is a huge gap here between the quality of education received by children of poverty and children of affluence. It means that the children who need and deserve the best education we can provide do not get it. And so state tax reform and education spending, remedying that shameful inequity, become spiritual issues, issues that have to do with the value and somebodiness of every child, every child of God.

Rabbi Howard Kushner, commenting on the phrase in the 23rd Psalm "He anoints my head with oil," came up with the gracious notion that it is the job of society, of every one of us, to make sure every child is anointed, that every child knows that he or she is somebody.

It is at the heart of Christian faith. At some point, in some way, we need to hear those blessed words, "You are my child, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." Some of us have not heard those words, in fact have heard the opposite. For some of us Christian faith, Christian religion, has not been an experience of grace at all.

In his spiritual memoir, the late Lewis Smedes remembers that what he heard from Christian faith was very different from grace. His mother was a good woman, a good mother, very pious, but she was obsessed with her own unworthiness and sinfulness. One time she found a risqué magazine beneath Smedes' mattress. She asked his older brother Peter about it. He remembers: "Peter, fresh from being born again, told her the worst which she dolefully related to me: Peter says that you are rotten, Lewis, yes, Lewis, rotten. Peter said that you are rotten. . . . She said it once and to be sure that it had sunk in, she kept pouring it like warm tar over my rotted soul; rotten, rotten, rotten. I am certain now that she did not believe what Peter had said. But I believed it and I believed that God believed it too" (*My God and I,* p. 18).

It was later, years later, that Smedes finally came to terms with grace, that God, in fact, loved him just as he was; that, in spite of his shortcomings, he was God's child, loved by God—"what I needed was to let God accept me with no consideration of whether I was acceptable or unacceptable. And then, when I had done that, to quit stewing about it and just rest in the fact that I was loved and accepted by God" (pp. 53–54). Paul Tillich was one of the most important theologians of our time. He was also one of the most difficult to understand. But once, in a sermon, he spoke with simple eloquence:

> Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our weakness, our lack of direction, have become intolerable. It strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know. Do not ask the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." [*The Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 162]

Each of us comes with different experiences, different histories, different baggage.

Some of us have been told that the color of our skin makes us inferior. And even though our minds know better, our hearts, our souls, bear a deep wound.

Some of us have been told that we are sinners so lost that God couldn't possibly find us and love us.

Some of have been told that we aren't smart enough, good enough, to amount to much.

Some of us have been told, sometimes by the church, that who we are is, and when we are merely being who we are we become, an abomination to God.

Some of us have been led to believe that while God loves special people, exceptional people, highly moral people, we don't make the grade.

Some of us have been told one way or another that God doesn’t much care one way or the other about who we are and what we are about.

The good news in Jesus Christ is that you are loved by God and that unconditional love confers on you identity, meaning, value, worth, and somebodiness.

The very good news is that you are God’s beloved child and you and your neighbor, each and everyone of us, belong to Jesus Christ forever.

Thanks be to God.